

U.S. Navy Puts New Emphasis On Anti-Submarine Training

New Threat From China Seen

By Audrey McAvoy

ABOARD THE USS RONALD REAGAN –

Two Navy destroyers and a cruiser dangle sonar devices into the ocean to listen for enemy submarines lurking 50 miles from Honolulu. Naval aviators in P-3 surveillance planes and helicopters drop sonar buoys into the sea to give the sailors more ears below the surface.

The submarines are not really enemy vessels at all, but U.S. subs participating in anti-submarine warfare training.

The exercises, held Jan. 9-12, are something Navy sailors will be doing more of in coming years. The Pacific Fleet has made training to track and destroy submarines its top combat priority amid concerns its sailors' skills have not kept up with the advanced diesel submarines China and other Pacific Rim countries have been buying.

"There is a real threat out there – over 140 diesel submarines in the Pacific, and the technology on them is getting better every day," said Capt. David F. Steindl, who directed the ships and aircraft during the exercises. "We need to train constantly to be ready if we ever have to face that threat."

Tracking submarines dropped on the Navy's list of priorities after the Cold War ended and the former Soviet Union began retiring some of its undersea vessels. Also, diesel submarines were considered too loud to pose much of a threat to the U.S. Navy and its silent-running nuclear subs.

But the emergence of quieter diesel subs has given anti-submarine warfare new urgency. These diesel submarines are no challenge to the U.S. Navy's supremacy at sea; they can't go fast enough for long enough distances for that. But they are quieter and thus harder to find and more capable of sneaking up on ships.

Owen Cote, associate director of the security studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said the United States is primarily concerned that China might use its diesel subs to block commercial ship access to Taiwan and force Taiwan to capitulate in a military showdown with Beijing.

Cote said the Navy might also have some concerns about North Korean submarines, as well as Iranian submarines in the Persian Gulf. But those vessels are not considered to be as advanced as those the Chinese have.

Steindl, commander of Destroyer Squadron Seven since April, said he has been spending twice as much time on anti-submarine warfare exercises than he did the last time he served at sea, four years ago. Now, he said, his team is training almost constantly for anti-submarine warfare.

Starting last summer, sailors aboard the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan spent months off San Diego matching their wits against the Gotland, a Swedish vessel that is among the world's quietest and hardest to detect diesel submarines.

The Gotland uses advanced technology to muffle its sound. It can also stay underwater for weeks at a time. Most diesel subs have to surface every day to recharge their batteries, making them vulnerable to attack.

Steindl said his sailors found ways to track the Gotland during their exercises, though he declined to say how. He said the training prepared his crew well.

"If we can go against her, we can go against anyone," he said.

Other Navy ships will get to train against the Gotland until June, when the Swedish sub is due to go home. The Navy also has been training with other nations that have diesel subs in their fleets. Last fall, U.S. ships held separate exercises with the Australian, Indian, and Japanese navies.

Ten nations lining the Western Pacific own 212 diesel submarines, including 132 that fall in the SSK, or "hunter-killer," category, according to "The Military Balance 2005-2006," a book put out by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. China alone owns 64.

Just over half of China's diesel submarines are outdated Romeo-class subs, but Beijing moved to upgrade its fleet by acquiring four advanced Russian-made Kilo-class submarines in the 1990s and ordering eight more in 2002.